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Why Focus
Groups are
Thriving

5 WAYS THAT FOCUS GROUPS MEET MARKETERS' NEEDS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

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Recently, technology has given marketers many new and innovative ways to tap in the customer psyche and create a stronger, more visceral understanding of the marketplace. And while these new marketing and marketing research tools have great promise, none has yet taken the place of the traditional focus groups in delivering valuable insight. As shown in the [2014 Greenbook Research Industry Trends report](#), respondents reported an increase of 21% in the use of qualitative research, third only in increases in usage of online communities and social media analytics. In total, 59% of 2014 GRIT respondents reported using traditional, face-to-face focus groups, virtually unchanged from 2013 levels.

To be sure, periodically some expert declares focus groups dead – or at least dying – and advocates for their removal from the marketing research tool kit. And just as inevitably, marketers continue to ignore these experts and use focus groups to develop stunning and exciting consumer insight that deliver business success and profits.

We know focus groups have limitations, and we know focus groups have constraints. Like all research methodologies, focus groups have advantages and disadvantages. And yet, [according to the Marketing Research Association](#), focus groups continue to be the most widely used qualitative research technique.

The Internet, social media, digital technologies, video and graphics – all of these trends have changed the way we communicate and conduct business with each other. We now expect things to happen faster, more creatively and more efficiently than ever. And those expectations of speed, collaboration, creativity and flexibility are now requirements in all of our interactions with each other, personally as well as in our business and commercial interactions.

Not surprisingly, those changes in the way we need to interact with each other have also impacted the way marketers interact within their teams and how they expect to use information in managing brands, products and services. Ironically, the traditional focus group (or dyad or triad) is ideal at delivering the environment demanded by today's marketers: offering greater speed, creativity, flexibility and collaboration than many other marketing research techniques.

WHY ARE FOCUS
GROUPS STILL SO
POWERFULLY EFFECTIVE
FOR MARKETERS?

No. 1

COLLABORATIVE CREATIVITY

“We use focus groups to help us get to the ‘Ah-Ha!’ moment more quickly. They are like a creativity pressure cooker – we all just get a lot more collaborative and thoughtful in the focus group setting.”

SENIOR INSIGHTS MANAGER, US CPG COMPANY

Great marketing is the art of making connections and building relationships – between products and customers, between services and customers, and between brands and customers. In the most natural sense, focus groups deliver the setting and inquiry that leads to the creation of and the understanding of these fundamental relationships. Indeed, the very flexibility of the focus groups structure (in terms of number of participants in the group) can replicate the nature of communications between consumers and marketers

Focus groups maximize all available brainpower (yours, the consumer’s and the moderator’s) by bringing

it together in a tightly defined opportunity for discussion and brainstorming. While we may begin the focus group process with one objective, we can allow consumer insight be developed ad hoc by following the discussion and commentary in the group. Indeed, technology in focus groups has delivered new ways to stimulate consumer thinking and to advance the discussion agenda, such as usability testing and other kinds of collaborative tools for marking up communications and brainstorming new product features.

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RECRUITING

“Facilities recruit focus group participants all the time and they know how to do it. We should have listened to the facility when our local electric utility wanted to learn why customers turned service off in their second homes during the off-season. Was it cost saving? Was it safety? Moreover, because turning the service off and on was costly to our client, what would get them to leave the service on full-time? They gave us a list of customers who turned their service on and off seasonally that we were to use to recruit a couple of groups. The facility asked us if we wanted to confirm that these customers really did turn their service on and off seasonally. Although we checked with the client several times, we were told it was not necessary, that their database was sound. So we recruited the groups and in the first group discovered that not a single participant had a second home or had turned their service on or off seasonally! If we had verified that behavior in the screener, we would have saved a lot of time and money.”

INDEPENDENT FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR

MORAL OF THE STORY

Take advantage of your focus group facility's expertise to structure the screener to get you the people you need. If something is important to meeting the research objectives, verify in the screener that you really are recruiting the right people!

No. 2

CUSTOMER INTIMACY

“Sitting behind the mirror and listening to Loyal Customer Sally Smith talk about her experience with your product is so much more powerful than going through a deck of charts about heavy users vs. medium users. Sally is real. Charts and graphs are data.”

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING RESEARCH,
GLOBAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANY

“The only thing more intimate than a focus group would be inviting customers into your own living room.” There is great power in watching a focus group. You look your customer in the eye, you see their body language, you get a strong sense of their emotions. You can watch them feel, touch, and use your products. You can watch their reactions to your carefully crafted messages. And when the focus group participants speak, they are speaking directly to the client.

And that communication can go well beyond the marketing team. Product research and design, engineering, operations – no matter

your role in product development and delivery, you cannot attend a focus group without hearing and being impressed by the voice of the customer. Focus group respondents pronounce judgments that influence the path and development of the product or service and impact its eventual success. And those product evaluations are all the more effective because of the intimate and personal nature focus group environment.

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REPORTING

“The groups were going well and we were getting a lot of great feedback. After the groups, I went into the client room and we debriefed. After the clients left, the manager of the facility approached me, looking very upset. The DVD recording had quit halfway through the first group and we missed the entire second group. Thank goodness they had an audio recording set as back-up! The client wanted the DVDs, but they wanted the information more”

AD AGENCY MODERATOR

MORAL OF THE STORY

Work with facilities that understand and respect the critical nature of the information being collected. They will have developed extensive redundancy procedures to protect your data and keep you looking good to your clients.

No. 3

TARGETING

“When you think about a target market, ‘women aged 25 to 54’ really can’t speak to me and my marketing team. I only need one woman, who lives in a specific city in the Southeastern U.S., who has real children, who have real activities, who works at a real job – that woman can speak to me and tell me how to help her accomplish what she needs to get done. The trick is in finding that one woman.”

SENIOR ACCOUNT MANAGER, AD AGENCY

One of the key benefits of focus groups is that marketers get to talk specifically and exactly to the correct person who can give you the information you need. Need a 35-year old Mom with an MBA and two adopted children? No problem. And who traveled to South America in the last six months? We can find her. And she is not a statistic or a data point – she has a name and a face.

Further, one of the principal benefits of focus groups is being able to identify in the recruiting process those individuals who

have the verbal skill and creativity to help marketers solve their problems. Skillful recruiting weeds out weaker participants, leaving only those participants who will generate a vigorous and robust discussion of the research objectives. Because representation of the target population is not the primary goal of focus group recruiting, we are able to hand-pick those participants who, because of personality or background, are most able to deliver the information we need to drive business success.

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OBSERVATION

“Thank goodness this facility was on their toes! Their proactivity really saved the group. I remember that the respondents were arriving and I was going through my last minute preparations with my clients when the hostess approached me for a private word. One of our participants was behaving strangely. While she met all the criteria on paper and was very articulate when directly addressed, she was sitting in the waiting room, muttering to herself and behaving oddly. (She seemed to be having a conversation with something or someone in her handbag!) The hostess believed the other participants were becoming uncomfortable with her odd behavior. We had enough respondents to proceed, so we sent her home. The consequences would have been far worse if the wayward respondent been allowed in and then had interrupted the group.”

FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR

MORAL OF THE STORY

Partner with the focus group facility staff by making sure they understand what you are trying to accomplish. Their observations about your participants can make a huge difference to the success of your project.

No. 4

SPEED

“As soon as the moderator finished the demo, the participants were completely silent. And it was not in stunned admiration. I think everyone on the team knew in that exact moment that we could not successfully launch that product.”

SENIOR PRODUCT MANAGER, US TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

All marketers continually fight the time challenge: we have less time to do the work, less time to launch the product, less time to prove the product works or not. Consumers today demand ever-changing and ever-evolving products and services. Many marketers simply do not have the time necessary for quantitative research. And they certainly don't have the time necessary for quantitative research that might or might not deliver game-changing information.

Well-designed, well-recruited and well moderated focus groups can deliver key insights in a nanosecond. As one marketing manager told us, “You walk into the groups scratching your head, and you walk out with answers and direction.”

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No. 5

FLEXIBILITY

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“In the first group, one of the respondents mentioned a new and different direction for the product. We had talked about it previously, but we had dismissed it. In the second group, we posed the new direction as an option to the groups and got a strong positive response. In the third and fourth groups, we continued exploring and fleshing out the new direction. The more we heard from the focus group, the more we knew we were onto something.”

DIRECTOR OF BRAND MANAGEMENT, GLOBAL PHARMA COMPANY

An obvious advantage to focus groups is that you do not get to the end of the project before you realize you've been asking the wrong questions. Because focus groups can take an iterative approach, the questions asked in the beginning define the questions to be asked later on in the groups. If you do not know the answer, you may not even know how to ask the question. Focus groups give you the chance to define the question while you are getting the answer.



FOCUS GROUPS: Perennial Favorite for Marketers

The stakes are high for marketing managers and marketing researchers alike these days. With increasing pressure on marketing research budgets, each project is required to provide critical insight for business success. The risk of non-delivery is high with many of the techniques available to marketing researchers, for the new and innovative techniques as well as for the “tried and true” techniques. And that is why focus groups continue to be popular with marketers. [As reported in Quirk’s 2014 Corporate Research Report](#), corporate purchasing of focus group facility and moderating services has held tight for nearly a decade, including during the 2008 economic downturn. Clearly, focus groups offer marketers an enduring value that supports their decision making.

Focus groups have many of the particular characteristics that marketing managers are looking for: They quickly deliver immediately useful insight and information. They are compelling and personal, producing results that drive change in behavior and direction. They are flexible and facilitate collaboration and creativity. In short, focus groups have the ability to ignite business success.

So, while they are not new or different, it is no wonder that focus groups remain a perennial favorite for marketing managers and researchers in all industries - and will continue as such for years to come.



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